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# Rethinking Identification With the Hegemonic Discourse of a “Strong Russia” Through Laclau and Mouffe

*Martin Müller*

*From the conceptual perspective of poststructuralist discourse theory as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, this contribution rethinks the project of a strong Russia. Drawing on material gathered during nine months of ethnographic research at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the premier school for educating future Russian elites, it argues that identification with a strong Russia is inherently ambiguous: Articulations of a strong Russia are always accompanied by the imminent possibility of a weak Russia. This constant possibility of a weak Russia prevents the full realisation of the identity of a strong Russia. The project of a strong Russia is therefore structured around a constitutive lack: It is always incomplete, but this incompleteness, at the same time, is the condition of its very possibility.*

## **Russia as a great power?**

The war in South Ossetia in August 2008 once again fuelled discussions on Russia’s re-emergence as a great power in world politics – a great power that flexes its military muscle and asserts its influence in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Arguments to this effect have dominated the news coverage at least since President Vladimir Putin’s second term in office and flared up in the aftermath of the South Ossetian incident: Headlines announced that “The bear is back” (The Australian, Dibb 2008), that the West faces “The Russian threat” (Die Zeit 2008) or, reminiscent of the epic Star Wars saga, that “The empire strikes back” (Time; Baer 2008). Even broadsheets such as the leading German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ran headlines like the following: “Russian foreign policy strategy still knows only one idea: the tank” (Zekri 2008).

In an editorial, Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff, senior director for policy programs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, claims that the world is witnessing “the attempt of a country to return to the centre of world politics with force. The Russian occupation tanks in Georgia are a symbol for the at-

tempt to re-establish old patterns of geopolitics. To create a belt of satellite states with limited sovereignty is Moscow's aim. [...] Backed by an exploding oil price, Moscow has started a kind of rollback" (Kleine-Brockhoff 2008: 2).

Diagnoses of a resurgent Russia are not confined to the public media, though. Many foreign policy scholars, while adopting a more toned-down voice, arrive at broadly similar conclusions. Gone seem the days of the 1990s when a staggering, unstable Russia appeared to be on the brink of collapse and could easily be dismissed in international politics. Since the start of the new millennium, Russia has exhibited new self-confidence and stability as it emphatically asserts its place in the international arena. Scholars observe that the country is pursuing an increasingly confrontational course vis-à-vis Western states and is attempting to restore its status as an influential world power and return to past greatness (most recently Allison 2008; Kanet 2007; King 2008; Trenin 2006, 2007). This literature forcefully makes the point of Russia's re-emergence as a great power and chronicles Russia's re-assertion in international politics.

Rethinking the identification with a strong Russia, this chapter locates itself within a body of critical discourse scholarship at the intersection of political geography and international relations. In political geography, what has become known as "critical geopolitics" examines the social construction of global space. How do certain narratives of world politics become seemingly objective points of identification? Adopting "discourse" as a conceptual linchpin, critical geopolitics views geography as being imbued with struggles for the power to organise, occupy and administer space (Dodds 2001; Ó Tuathail 1996). In a similar vein, discourse takes centre stage in critical international relations theory (e.g. Edkins 1999; George 1994; Milliken 1999): It constructs meaning within systems of signification and produces the subjects it speaks of. The clarion call of such work has been "to demystify the process by which political subjects are made" (Kuus 2007: 91; see especially Campbell 1992). The analysis of global politics through a discursive lens then is not so much an effort to measure the objective interests of states as rational actors entrenched in struggles for power and security, but rather an interpretation of how meaning and subjects in international politics are constituted in specific contexts.

Such a perspective has recently begun to take hold in the analysis of Russian foreign policy, enlisting the ideas of various post-positivist theorists such as Alain Badiou (Prozorov 2008), Michel Foucault (Neumann 2008), or Ernesto Laclau (Makarychev 2005; Morozov in this volume). Drawing on the work of Laclau

and Mouffe (Laclau 1990, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), this chapter follows in the footsteps of poststructuralist discourse theory to show that the hegemonic project of a strong Russia is a highly ambiguous one. It is shot through with intense doubts and misgivings about the very possibility of a strong Russia. Many accounts of Russian great-power fantasies fail to problematise this ambiguity. Instead, they diagnose the emergence of a Russia triumphant in which great-power ideology rules almost completely unbridled. The discursive construction of a strong Russia, however, is bound up with fears of a weak Russia – a Russia that fails to realise its ambitious plans to live up to its great-power potential, that is perceived to be marginalised, or is even excluded from world politics.

By way of empirical illustration, this chapter employs material collected during ethnographic research at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the premier institute for teaching international relations in Russia (see Müller 2009). What makes MGIMO interesting for studying identification with a strong Russia is its affiliation with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian state apparatus more generally. Not only does the institute train future Russian diplomats, but it also serves as a preparatory school for students who are to later occupy influential positions in Russian politics and society. Thus, the following is more than an isolated case study. Given the pivotal role of MGIMO in the reproduction of Russian elites, looking at the way discourses are recited in elite education may even provide a glimpse of the geopolitical thinking of the future Russian elites.

### **Ethnography and discourse analysis**

*Prima facie*, the liaison of ethnography and discourse analysis may seem odd. A large number of discourse analytical approaches originate in linguistics, which makes for their fixation on discourse as text and talk, or as “language in use” (Taylor 2001: 6). The linguistic turn in the social sciences with its interest in the semiosis of representation further reinforced this linguistic focus. Given their conceptual lineage from language philosophy, structuralism and poststructuralism served to cement a take on discourse research that owed much to Derrida’s famous and often misinterpreted dictum that “there is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida 1976: 158). It is not surprising, then, if discourse analysis is considered the paragon of the linguistic turn in the social sciences (cf. Neumann 2002: 629).

Ethnographic research, on the other hand, is mostly concerned with the everyday practices and interactions of social groups in a particular setting (Den-

zin 1997). In this kind of research, text and talk often play a subordinate role. Furthermore, with its attention to social practices, ethnography is occasionally set in deliberate contrast to discourse analysis, which, allegedly, produces lopsided research “relegating or even erasing people’s experiences and everyday understandings of the phenomena under question” (Megoran 2006: 622). Proponents of discourse analysis, on the other hand, might argue that the problem of methodogenesis in ethnography turns discourses into creatures of the ethnographer’s own making instead of reflecting larger social structures. After all, the ethnographic researcher does not merely record or retrieve data, but actively partakes in its creation.

Notwithstanding the seeming incommensurability of ethnography and discourse analysis, I would like to argue that there is added value in combining the two. In particular, ethnography is able to elucidate the workings of discourse in specific contexts. In so doing, it looks at how discourses from the global or national level play out in particular settings that might otherwise be off-limits for other research methods.

“Attempts to understand the complex relations between the international and everyday demonstrate the importance of ensuring that small, mundane daily practices of everyday life are understood in relation to the reconstructions of the nation and the international” (Dowler and Sharp 2001: 174).

Analysing the mechanisms through which discursive subjectivation becomes powerful is the key advantage of harnessing ethnography for discourse analysis. It examines the power of discourse to structure the social world and make subjects that identify with certain subject positions. By engaging with people instead of systems or states, an ethnographic discourse analysis collapses the distance between the research subjects and the researcher (Bigo and Walker 2007).

Discourse analysis drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe is not dogmatic about the choice of methodology. In fact, Howarth (2004: 336) explicitly includes ethnographic methods such as qualitative interviewing and participant observation in the discourse analytic repertoire and cautions against “linguistic reductionism”. Of course, employing such reactive methods of data collection demands an adequate problematisation of the research process. Issues of positionality and researcher subjectivity, access and rapport, power asymmetries, or

selectivity must not be bracketed in a discourse analysis that relies on ethnographic material. For the present case, a comprehensive treatment of methodological issues can be found in Müller (2009).

I conducted the ethnographic research for this study when I was an exchange student at MGIMO during the academic year 2005/2006, attending lectures and seminars that seemed relevant to my overall interest in geopolitical identities. A professor at MGIMO supervised my research in order to ensure compliance with the tacit local codes governing primary research. During the time at MGIMO, I kept a field diary, audiotaped lectures, and, towards the end of my research time, conducted 39 semi-structured interviews with students of different departments at MGIMO. The following analysis draws on 25 hours of transcribed material from lectures and seminars and 22 hours of transcribed material from interviews with students on Russian foreign policy and Russia's role in world politics. Insofar as the interviews did not occur naturally, they inevitably reflect the influence of the interviewer to a much greater degree than the lectures.

It is only through *in situ* fieldwork such as ethnography that suitable material for an analysis of discourses at MGIMO can be gathered. One caveat is in order, however: it is not my intention, nor indeed is it possible, to paint a representative picture of the whole student and lecturer body at MGIMO. The verbatim excerpts presented in this article have been chosen to reflect what I have interpreted as the dominant themes in the material and are meant to represent typical cases – to the extent that this is ever possible. Moreover, my position as a German and European researcher is inevitably tightly knit into almost all stages of my research, making the interpretations of great-power visions rendered in this chapter not a somehow external object of inquiry but, to a significant degree, my own creation.

### **Imagining a strong Russia**

The professors and students from my sample largely recite a discourse of Russia as a strong and prospering country on the upswing. While Russia was weak and troubled in the 1990s, afflicted with domestic unrest and engrossed in a search for itself, the inauguration of President Putin and the start of the new millennium – so the story goes – have broken this deadlock. Russia's re-emergence as a strong power is articulated at MGIMO by drawing together elements from a range of different, sometimes even conflicting geopolitical dis-

courses. The notion of a “strong Russia” has such diverse meanings as recuperating Russia’s geopolitical influence in world politics and, particularly, in the post-Soviet states, establishing Russia as an independent pole in a multipolar world order, defending Russian national pride and cranking up Russia’s economy.

Students’ comments on Russia’s geopolitical ambitions express the self-confidence of a young generation that has come of age in the rising Russia of the new millennium. Mikhail (Year 3, International Relations, 11/68)<sup>1</sup> observes that Russia has recently progressed from being a state that was more or less ignored in world politics and needed help to sort itself out to one that counts as a key player, as is evident in the Iran conflict or in its membership in the G8. Xenia underscores this point (Year 4, Other Department, 33/3) and claims that Russia is a powerful country that is respected and even feared by other states.

Russia’s endeavour to rebuild its geopolitical influence is framed within a narrative of restoring the status of a great power, which it lost in the post-Soviet transformation. It is therefore not a new quality, but one that has always rightfully belonged to Russia. Only few claim that Russia’s great-power status vanished irrevocably with the collapse of the Soviet Union and can hardly be regained, whereas the majority is convinced that in one way or another Russia, is either in the process of becoming a great power or has already become one. The conception that Russia’s “great powerness” is virtually ingrained in the Russian people, that Russia is destined to be a great power, is seen as very prominent in Russian society. Sergei even claims that being a great power is virtually incapable for Russia:

“In fact, if Russia is fated to make a choice at some point, if it wants to exist, then it has to be a great power. To some degree, even our leadership understands this. The phrase that Russia must either be great or not exist at all is attributed to Vladimir Putin. [...] Russia must be, and we believe that it is destined to become, a great power.” (Sergei, Year 3, International Relations, 01/71)

The notion of great power is associated with certain attributes and demands that a great power needs to fulfil. At MGIMO, being a great power means that Russia should play a more salient role in the post-Soviet space. There is a

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1 Details in parentheses indicate students’ progress, subject of study, and the transcript code of the relevant passage.

strong feeling that Russia and the post-Soviet states are still united by a common bond, given their shared history within the Soviet Union. According to this position, one country cannot do without the other:

"History shows that we live badly without each other, that we are used to being together. [...] That is, the republics of the CIS cannot do without us and, in fact, nor can we do in a meaningful way without them." (Liuba, Year 4, International Relations, 09/47)

Although the notions of dependence and solidarity among post-Soviet states figure prominently in statements at MGIMO, the same students and lecturers also demand Russian independence. A strong Russia is also an independent Russia that does not look to others for orientation or let others dictate Russian actions. Russia is construed as a self-sufficient (*samodostatochnaia*) country that should pursue an independent foreign policy without having to take into account the interests of other states. Once again, integration into a larger alliance of states does not figure prominently in this imagination, as one lecturer elaborates:

"I want to say that there is no sense in Russia joining the EU, because Russia itself has to become a centre of force. Because all who accede join the EU as a centre of force. But Russia itself has to form something around itself; they should join Russia, this integration in the context of the CIS. That is, Russia should attract others and not the other way round." (Lecture 14/74)

Only if Russia accrues enough strength can it act as an independent centre of force in world politics and work towards establishing a multipolar world order. The vision of a multipolar world is thus invariably tied to Russia's re-emergence as an influential world power.

Only in rare instances does such a great-power vision of Russia's future draw critique. Boris (Year 4, International Journalism, 27/13, 49) is one of the very few students who voices doubts about the usual conceptions of Russia as a great power. Instead, he offers a different idea of what constitutes a great power:

"For me, a great power is primarily a state that can serve as an epitome of virtue for other states, an example of highly moral, highly cultured political relations with that country. A highly developed society that has a high level of self-awareness, which has its role in the world and which, finally, has good economic indicators. That's what a great power is for me." (Boris, Year 4, International Journalism, 27/49)



Boris therefore does not completely dismiss the great-power concept for Russia. However, he envisions a great power with different, more humanist attributes, but one that is still influential in the world. The emphasis that Boris places on economic indicators is shared by many of his fellow students: Economic success serves to buttress Russia's claim to a leading position in world politics. It not only garners the respect of the world's leading states and perhaps places Russia among them, but it also enables Russia to play the desired pre-eminent role in the post-Soviet space:

"[W]ithout economic relations, without economic growth, it is impossible to return these republics to Russia, to tie them closer to Russia just through some political will."  
(Tatiana, Year 4, International Relations, 08/3)

Economic development is thus not an aim in itself, but always constitutive of the larger project of rebuilding a strong Russia.

It is important to emphasise that arguing in favour of Russian strength and independence in such manifold ways does not necessarily imply a hostile or uncooperative stance towards the West. In fact, many students view cooperation with Europe and the US as essential if Russia wants to become a true world leader and be included in the ranks of the most powerful states. For Mila (Year 4, International Relations, 13/81), cooperation is a necessity in a globalised world if states do not want to fall behind. The clarion call in the foreign policy of today's Russia is thought to be cooperation and not, as in the Soviet Union, aggressive conflict. A strong Russia thus maintains constructive relations with the West, all the while safeguarding its sovereignty and independence.

At MGIMO, the vision of Russia as a strong and independent state is linked to a multitude of ideas about Russia's role and place in world politics and its relations to other states. A strong Russia is a sovereign state; it is neither East nor West, but unique in its constitution; it unifies the post-Soviet space; it defends Russian national interests; it enjoys economic prosperity; it upholds national pride; it regains global influence and respect; it cooperates with Western states. The idea of a strong Russia is able to unify the social terrain by providing a comprehensive universal screen onto which all kinds of geopolitical hopes, demands, and aspirations can be projected.

This unifying effect is characteristic for what Laclau (1996: 36) calls *empty signifiers* – signifiers without a signified. Empty signifiers collapse all differences into chains of equivalence. In this process, the idea of a strong Russia becomes essentially amorphous: It does not have any intrinsic meaning, but is defined by the demands inscribed on it. As the meaning of other signifiers becomes partially fixed in relation to the empty signifier, the chain of equivalence begins to structure an ever-greater part of the social. This results in the emergence of a discourse in which the flow of differences is arrested around empty signifiers as privileged discursive centres that institute definite meanings. The presence of empty signifiers is thus the very condition of the emergence of hegemonic discourses (Laclau 1996: 43).

The success of the hegemonic discourse of a strong Russia is predicated on the ability of various forces to claim that they fill the empty signifier of "strong Russia". Given the range of different demands projected onto the idea of a strong Russia, the project seems to be fairly successful as a unifying force. This testifies to the ability of the empty signifier to cancel differences: There is hardly anyone who would reject the project of a strong Russia. It successfully unites elements that are often articulated in separate, even conflicting Russian geopolitical discourses identified by authors like O'Loughlin et al. (2005), Smith (1999), or Tsygankov (2003): The reassertion of Russian influence in the Near Abroad and the unity of Slavic people appeals to demands often ascribed to a Slavophile position; the attempt to make Russia a respected, full-fledged member of the global group of leading states and recoup its great-power status picks up demands voiced from what is typically described as a statist position; the agenda of establishing Russia as an independent centre of power in Eurasia ties in with demands articulated within various Eurasianist geopolitical discourses; and the focus on improving Russia's economic performance fulfils demands that are commonly attributed to a geo-economic discourse. The concept of a strong Russia is thus a hegemonic discourse.

The hegemonic discourse at MGIMO shares many similarities with what Smith (1999), O'Loughlin et al. (2005), and many others have identified as a democratic statist position. Russia is considered a great power that is different from the West, but nevertheless accepts that cooperation with it is necessary in certain issues or plays the role of a political broker to mediate in conflicts with states like Iran. Just like at MGIMO, democratic statism represents the Near Abroad as somehow belonging to one community with Russia and as crucial to

Russian geopolitical interests and its re-assertion as a great power. Both Smith (1999) and O'Loughlin et al. (2005) find that democratic statism is the dominant discourse among Russia's ruling elites and in the Russian population – a dominance that is also evident at MGIMO.

This empirical parallel underscores MGIMO's close involvement in the Russian state apparatus. Its status as an elite school ensures that its graduates occupy high-ranking positions not only in foreign policy, but in the Russian state and the corporate world at large. MGIMO alumni are oligarchs, ministers, heads of state, and top business managers. MGIMO acts as a locus of consecration, bestowing societal distinction on a social group that is elected to become the governing elite (cf. Bourdieu 1996). It fashions a future elite with the authority to perpetuate the hegemonic geopolitical structures.

### **What prevents a strong Russia from being?**

Articulations of a strong Russia at MGIMO do not go uncontested, however. They are accompanied by misgivings about Russia's ability to live up to this image, to realise this identity. Russia is frequently portrayed as "not quite yet a strong Russia", as a strong Russia in the making. Optimistic ideas about what Russia should and could be are contrasted with the stark reality of the present day. Frequently, this divide between reality and aspiration is couched in terms of an unfulfilled potential.

"This is why I think that if we define the situation of Russia, then Russia has the potential and the ability to play the role of one of the great powers, of one of the first powers on a global level. But at the moment this is not true." (Lecture 14/31)

But what is it that prevents this realisation of a strong Russia right now? At MGIMO, several obstacles to this great-power identity are articulated. Most prominently, Western actions obviate Russia's re-emergence. The "Colour Revolutions" in several post-Soviet states are often associated with Western agency, which aims to weaken Russia by snatching away its former brother states. Just as in Soviet times, the West is seen to be still working against Russia:

"[L]ook at those botanic revolutions, or at the horticultural revolutions or at the flower revolutions, as they call them. Lemon revolution, saffron revolution. All those revolutions cannot do without Western NGOs. The West, in fact, is at work. It is just that in the

closed Soviet society, we did not know how the West worked against us." (Lecture 62/4)

By the same token, the eastern expansion of the European Union and NATO is perceived as an effort to contain Russia:

"All ex-republics of the CIS are rushing to follow the West, joining NATO or joining the EU. There is a constant tendency of dissociation from Russia, of diminishing the Russian influence over these states." (Tatiana, Year 4, International Relations, 08/3)

If we recall that close integration with the post-Soviet states is a constitutive moment of the "strong Russia" discourse, perceived attempts at drawing these states away from Russia present an assault on this discursive hegemony. The West is seen as supporting the centrifugal tendencies in the post-Soviet states and is thus negotiated into an antagonistic role vis-à-vis Russia. Both factions are vying for influence; they are "pulling the blanket back and forth between each other" (*peretiagivaiut drug na druga odeialo*) (Yulia, Year 4, Political Science, 25/16). This competition sometimes translates into outright opposition to Russia:

"Right now, I think that Ukraine and Georgia are like cards that the Western countries, the US among others, play in order to curtail Russia's sphere of influence, overturn its political authority and partly even overturn the country itself. I think that this [NATO membership] is a carrot [*kalach*] with which they entice these countries." (Vasily, Year 4, International Relations, 19/59)

It is not only the perceived threat of losing the post-Soviet states and Western opposition that prevent Russia from becoming the influential power it wants to become. There is also the impression at MGIMO that Russia is excluded from world politics more generally. The global dominance of the US foils all Russian attempts at building a multipolar world that recognises the interests of other powers than the US. It appears that Russia's wish to play a role equal to that of European states does not find recognition. On the contrary, at MGIMO, sometimes the feeling prevails that many in the West would prefer to see Russia revert to imperialist sphere-of-influence thinking and thus confirm the deeply ingrained stereotypes.

“One other thing that I feel sad about is that Russia very often plays the role of a whipping boy [*mal’chik dlia bit’ia*] in international relations, because Russia’s prestige, its image in the eyes of other countries is not improving or is only improving very slowly. All of my friends who were in Europe say that Russia is perceived as a monster there. Such negative dispositions! And at all conferences that were especially organised for Russians and Europeans, to jointly study and research certain problems, Russia serves as an example of all the anti-democratic vices you can possibly think of in this world.” (Natalia, Year 3, Political Science, 29/5)

Rather than being taken seriously as an equal partner, Russia is looked down upon as backward and underdeveloped.

“We can do what we want: we stay unreliable partners. Here, again, it is tried to create such a negative image of Russia.” (Aleksandr, Year 3, International Relations, 14/57)

Russia’s willingness to cooperate with the West, as expressed in imaginations of a strong Russia in the previous section, is thus thwarted by the imputed reluctance of the West to recognise Russia as a serious partner. This lack of recognition is a persistent and recurring topos in descriptions of Russia’s relations with Western states.

The motif of exclusion points to the tight conceptual coupling of antagonism and dislocation emphasised by Laclau (1990: 5-41). The West acts as an (external) antagonist and threat to Russia’s great-power project, whereas the lack of recognition and lament of Russia’s unfulfilled potential present a (internal) dislocation. Both antagonism and dislocation prevent the full constitution of a strong Russia and therefore need to be countered if Russia wants to become strong. The favoured strategy at MGIMO for countering these blockages consists in reaffirming the hegemonic discourse of a strong Russia: in order to withstand outside threats and overcome exclusion, Russia must become stronger.

“We should learn our lessons from all this and gather our strength in order to then solve our tasks. We don’t feel hurt that others will play give-away with us [*igrat’ v poddavki*], that they want to settle their accounts with us. As long as we are not strong, nobody is obliged to us in any way.” (Alexander, Year 3, International Relations, 14/50)

Russia must develop its potential if it wants to garner recognition in the international arena and put an end to exclusion. Marina invokes the example of the USSR as a great power that nobody dared to ridicule or ignore:

"If we just take the USSR. It was a great power [*velikaia derzhava*]. Nobody would have said this [such derogatory things] about it. There were a lot of bad things, but still it was a great power." (Marina, Year 4, Other Department, 34/62)

Only if Russia gains in power will it have a chance to counter exclusion and opposition and work towards the aim of realising the identity of a strong Russia. The possibility of a weak Russia that gives in to outside forces must be ruled out.

The majority opinion of students at MGIMO holds that on its path towards becoming a great power, Russia is required first of all to increase its economic leverage. Most students preferred realising Russian economic interests over Russian political interests, when asked directly. This primacy of the economy is often justified as a new pragmatism that has supposedly replaced the ideological baggage of the Soviet Union.

"I think that Russia's position now is pragmatic and ideologically we do not look to anyone specifically. Even economically. In my opinion, the engine of history now is the economy and not ideology, religion or something else. We are pragmatic and develop the relations with our partners, with those who are ready." (Ivan, Year 4, International Journalism, 05/9)

Viktor (Year 4, Political Science, 18/5) similarly judges that political confrontation is "too costly: we don't have money for all that nonsense". Foresighted economic policy guarantees stability and improves the welfare of Russian citizens. Only in the case of societal prosperity can a state conduct a successful domestic and foreign policy, students believe:

"I think that right now, realising Russian economic interests is more important, because political interests follow them. If economic interests are more or less satisfied, then politics follows them anyway. This is inevitable. They always go together. But primarily it will be economic ones, because if people are hungry in your country, they won't support those politicians that will realise the government of the state." (Oleg, Year 4, International Relations, 26/9)

"Generally speaking, politics – that's words, and economy – that's business [*delo*]. It's more important to see something in practice and that's what the economy is all about." (Vitaly, Year 4, International Relations, 28/9)

For Tatiana, the neglect of the economy was one of the primary reasons for the demise of the USSR:

“What is the reason for the disintegration of the Soviet Union? It is because the leaders of the Soviet Union did not understand that when the economy is starting to stall, when it stops working, then one has to direct all attention not towards extending one’s sphere of influence, but towards the economy. Because a strong economy means a strong politics, as Marx already said. Now we no longer believe in Marx, but this postulate remains and it is a correct statement.” (Tatiana, Year 4, International Relations, 08/11)

Post-Soviet Russia is seen as having learned from this experience and following the correct order: first the economy, then politics. In the competition with other states, garnering their recognition is an important element:

“Improving our economic situation, we become more important in the world arena and the big countries will turn their attention to us. [...] I think that we first have to develop the economy as it is necessary, and then they will already address us in a completely different way.” (Galia, Year 4, International Relations, 23/10)

Recovering its economic potential will allow Russia to turn from an object into a subject of international relations and shape international political processes more actively. It will allow it to shake off and withstand the antagonistic forces:

“When we have completely gotten back on our feet, when we have acquired that economic power, only then can we dictate our terms.” (Larissa, Year 4, International Relations, 15/11)

“Great powerness” is thus primarily associated with the soft power of the economy and not with the hard power of military clout. This prominence of the economy seems all the more plausible when looking at students’ socialisation and life trajectories. In a time when the Russian economy was booming and companies were scouring the Russian labour market for new graduates, the attention of highly qualified students at MGIMO was increasingly attracted by private business. A similar thing may be said about lecturers, who also experi-

enced first-hand the economic upturn in Russia and the new possibilities it opens up in the international arena.

With Laclau (1990), the strategy of making Russia still stronger to defeat the antagonistic forces blocking its identity is founded on the illusion that upon defeating the antagonist, the subject will be able to complete its identity. Antagonism, however, not only blocks the realisation of Russia's geopolitical identity, but at the same time is the condition of its very possibility.

"I cannot destroy a context without destroying at the same time the identity of the particular subject who carries out the destruction. It is a very well known historical fact that an oppositionist force whose identity is constructed within a certain system of power is ambiguous vis-à-vis that system, because the latter is what prevents the constitution of identity and it is, at the same time, its condition of existence. And any victory against the system also destabilizes the identity of the victorious force." (Laclau 1996: 27)

The blockages described in this section are thus paradoxically subversive and constitutive of Russian geopolitical identity. They are subversive because they threaten or block the emergence of a strong Russia: Due to their presence, Russia cannot become what it aspires to be. The Western influence in the post-Soviet space, the expansion of NATO and the EU, the disregard for Russia – all this is interpreted as creating the imminent possibility of a weak Russia and needs to be done away with if Russia ever wants to become strong. At the same time, these forces are constitutive of Russian geopolitical identity, because it is only in their presence that a strong Russia can be thought. Russia must be strong, Russia must rebuild its economy in order to resist and overcome outside threats and marginalisation, in order to annihilate the antagonistic forces.

### **Making the geopolitical subject**

We have seen that the discourse of a strong Russia at MGIMO features the qualities necessary to make it hegemonic: It successfully unifies a wide range of political demands and thus is able to assert its objectivity and structure the social field. Whether it is Russian cultural uniqueness, Russian independence and sovereignty in international relations, the concept of multipolarity, the defence of Russian national interests, Russian economic prosperity, or Russian influence in the post-Soviet states – all of those come together in a chain of equivalence around the empty signifier of a "strong Russia".



This empty signifier, however, does not refer to a high density of meaning, but rather expresses an absent fullness. The material from MGIMO demonstrates that the geopolitical discourse of a strong Russia does not refer to a fully constituted identity, but to an unachieved wholeness. The identity of a strong Russia is blocked. Russia is not a strong country, but rather an emerging strong country, a strong country in the making. However, a multiplicity of antagonistic forces always prevents the full realisation of a “strong Russia” identity. By threatening to foil the subject of a “strong Russia”, by threatening to leave Russia weak and enfeebled, these antagonistic forces elicit a re-affirmation of this very hegemonic project: In order to counter the threats emanating from the antagonistic forces, Russia must become even stronger.

The geopolitical subject at MGIMO arises from the identification with the hegemonic project of a “strong Russia” that is, however, always faced with antagonistic forces that prevent it from being. Because of the presence of antagonistic forces, the hegemony of the identification with a strong Russia can never be complete. According to Laclau, every hegemonic project always contains in itself the possibility of its negation and subversion: “the incomplete and contingent nature of the totality would spring not only from the fact that no hegemonic system can be fully imposed, but also from the intrinsic ambiguities of the project itself.” (Laclau 1990: 28) Hegemonic projects are thus always unstable and constantly challenged by what they exclude.

Being the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of a strong Russia, a weak Russia is always present as a permanent lack in articulations of a strong Russia. In the discourse theory of Laclau, this corresponds to the constitution of the subject as

“the subject of the signifier. It strives to inscribe itself as a signifier in the symbolic order, but cannot find a signifier which represents it. The subject is therefore penetrated by a constitutive lack. The subject is this lack, and the subjectivation of the subject through the identification with different subject positions is merely an attempt to fill it.” (Torfing 1999: 57)

The subject has a failed structural identity. It is compelled to act in the attempt to fill this structural lack through identification with different subject positions and recreate an imaginary wholeness.

### **Revising our understanding of a strong Russia**

By the end of the Putin presidency, identification as a great power seems to have imparted a measure of stability to Russia. As the hegemonic discourse, it has achieved a broad social consensus around the empty signifier of a "strong Russia" – a consensus that is also reflected at MGIMO. By now, there is a wealth of material examining Russia's ambition to become a great power. However, looking at the discourse of a strong Russia through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's poststructuralist discourse theory refines our understanding of this project in two respects.

First, it highlights the inherent ambiguity of the project of a strong Russia: this ambiguity is evident throughout MGIMO in the split between what Russia would like to be and what it currently is, between aspiration and reality. This makes for often rather contradictory positions where students and lecturers boast Russia's military and economic power, but lament its marginalisation and exclusion from world politics at the same time. At MGIMO, imaginations of a strong Russia are coupled with imaginations of the impending possibility of a weak Russia. This co-presence of a weak Russia as the opposite of a strong Russia is constitutive of the production of Russian great-power identity. A strong Russia is always predicated on what it claims not to be. Every study of Russian great-power identity therefore also needs to be attentive to the articulation of the blockage that underpins this identity.

Second, Russian identity as articulated at MGIMO is structured around what Laclau calls a constitutive lack. The subject has a failed structural identity, i.e., an identity that is never complete, and comes to act through the need to fill the lack in the discursive structure. Rather than claiming that subjects at MGIMO identify with a Russia that already has a great-power identity, it would be more adequate to say that they identify with a Russia that strives to realise a great-power identity. This difference is not trivial. It means that for a strong Russia to become a hegemonic identification, it needs an antagonist that blocks this very identity. A strong Russia is then articulated as the solution to overcome this blockage. From a discourse theoretical perspective, Western moves directed at opposing or isolating a strong Russia are thus likely to only reinforce the antagonistic divide and buttress Russian strong-power identity instead of assuaging it. Such policy might lead to the emergence of a forceful chain of equivalence in which a reinforced "strong Russia" faces a Western antagonist.

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